

## LICHEN SIMPLEX CHRONICUS

### WHAT IS IT?

A skin condition caused by chronic scratching. It tends to develop more easily in patients with other skin diseases such as eczema, psoriasis, and contact dermatitis.

### HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

Many things may have precipitated the itching such as skin allergy, eczema or a yeast infection. Usually the itching stops when the skin heals. If the scratching occurs over several weeks, sometimes the itching can continue on its own. This can lead to the chronic "itch-scratch-itch cycle". With continued rubbing and scratching, the skin gradually becomes thick and leathery. The nerve endings in the skin signal "itch" more easily in lichen simplex chronicus than in normal skin. Over time, it becomes impossible to tell whether scratching triggers the itch or vice versa. Chronic scratching can cause excoriations and the skin can become secondarily infected with bacteria and/or yeast. This will need to be treated. Itching and scratching often worsens with stress, heat and humidity.

### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

The vulvar skin is sensitive and extremely itchy. You may wake up at night scratching. With chronic scratching the skin is damaged, leading to the sensation of rawness, burning and pain. The area looks pink to dusky red, even purple. There is swelling and thickening so that the skin feels leathery. There may be open weeping, bleeding or dried crusts depending on the scratching.

### HOW IS IT TREATED?

- The goal of treatment is to stop the itch-scratch-itch cycle and allow the skin to heal. Practice good vulvar hygiene (see separate hand-out).
- Moisturize the skin.
- Superimposed bacterial or yeast infections will need to be treated.

- The mainstay of therapy are moderate to high potency steroid ointment applied to the affected areas to control inflammation.
- Treat the itch! Cold compresses or sitz baths with Burow's solution may be helpful for open, oozing, itchy vulvar skin.
- Antihistamines or sedatives may relieve nighttime itching.
- Some anti-depressants have strong anti-itch properties (example, doxepin or amitriptyline) and may help you sleep thru the night.
- Improvement will take several weeks to months. However, itching can flare up from time to time. As the skin improves, the steroid can be applied less frequently.